Jewish and Chinese Diasporas

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300 The word "diaspora" in its normative usage indicates the dispersion of Jews and the settling of Jewish communities after the Babylonian captivity, and more generally, it refers to Jews living outside of Palestine or modern Israel. In recent decades, however, discussions of cultures and communities other than the Jewish have often applied the word "diaspora" in a much expanded sense to other minority groups living outside their native land. The term has been rather widely used in such a broad sense with reference to Chinese communities overseas, and it is perhaps time now that we put Jewish and Chinese diasporas together for an examination. Why Jewish and Chinese? What do these minority groups have in common? What implications may the relationship between such diasporas and their host nations have for the future—not only for these minority groups themselves, but for the regions involved and perhaps even for the world at large?

Let us begin by taking a close look at the comparison of the Chinese and the Jews. Many scholars have mentioned King Vajiravudh of Thailand, the chief ideologue of official Thai nationalism in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, as one of the first to compare the Chinese with Jews. The Thai king called the Chinese "the Jews of the Orient" with all the implications of age-old anti-Semitic stereotypes; he portrayed the Chinese as "every bit as unscrupulous and as unconscionable as the Jews," and accused them in racist terms of being "aliens by birth, by nature, by sympathy, by language, and finally by choice," as "born intriguers and conspirators" (qtd in Tejapira 77).[1] Such a negative comparison, however, was hardly original and had historical roots reaching back to a much earlier time. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, traveling to Java and writing about the Javans and the Chinese in 1602, an Englishman, Edmund Scot, already made a similar comparison when he described the Chinese as "living as slaves under [the Javans]," but doing all kinds of

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL SEPTEMBER 2009 SEPTEMBRE RCLC
0319-051x/09/36.3/300

work in the country and "suck[ing] away all the wealth of the Land, by reason that the Javans are so idle." He went on to say:

> The Javans themselves are very dull and blockish to manage any affairs of a Commonwealth, whereby all strangers goe beyond them that come into their land; and many of the Country of Clyn, which come thither to dwell, doe grow very rich, and rise to great Offices and Dignitie amongst them...especially the Chinese who like Jews live crooching under them, but rob them of their wealth, and send it to China.
>
> (qtd in Zenner 53)[2]

As Walter Zenner comments, Edmund Scot "here extended the European stereotype of the Jew to a far-off people and also encapsulated the dichotomy between the 'hard-working, crafty migrant middle-man' and the 'lazy native,' a distinction which persists into Southeast Asia and other parts of the world" (53-54). And then, at the end of the nineteenth century, Warrington Smythe, a British advisor to the Thai government at the time, "saw the Chinese as advancing socially and economically at the expense of the Thais" (Zenner 55). He again used the same comparison and called the Chinese "the Jews of Siam" (Zenner 55). Smythe was in Thailand when Chulalongkorn was king, and Chulalongkorn sent his son, the future King Vajiravudh, to Oxford and Sandhurst for a Western education at a time when anti-Semitic sentiments were quite common in England. Evidently, King Vajiravudh was not the first to put the Chinese and the Jews in a negative comparison, and his prejudice against the Chinese and the Jews was obviously influenced by European anti-Semitism. In his 1914 pamphlet called *The Jews of the Orient*, Vajiravudh defined the Thai or Siamese identity by total exclusion and repression. "One is either a Chinese or a Siamese; no one could be both at the same time, and people who pretend that they are so are apt to be found to be neither," said the King categorically. "We can only count as Siamese those who have *definitely* decided to adopt the Siamese nationality, cutting themselves quite completely from all Chinese association. They must throw their lots in with us *absolutely* before we accept them as one of us" (qtd in Tejapira 77-78). The clear-cut dichotomy between "us" and "them" reveals the mentality of a xenophobic and self-enclosed "blood nationalism," which clearly shows that the "local" or "native" identity is tendentiously constructed against the Chinese as outsiders, negatively compared to the Jews as foreign intruders who are taking over the local economy and society at the expense of the "natives." 301

Since the Jews and the Chinese had existed in their respective host countries for a very long time before the late nineteenth century, the intensification of anti-Semitism and anti-Sinicism at the turn of the century must have had some specific historical circumstances. The changes related to the transformation of older, more patrimonial economic forms of society to a modern one, and at the same time the rise of nationalism in Europe and the other parts of the world, may give us a clue. As Daniel Chirot argues, "the rise of modern nationalism hardened attitudes toward those newly viewed as outsiders. Entrepreneurial minorities, previously seen as just one

more among many specialized ethnic and religious groups that existed in most complex, premodern agrarian societies, now became, in the eyes of the new nationalists, something considerably more threatening" (8). The xenophobic "blood nationalism" and the exaggerated sense of group identity built on ethnic and racial grounds gave rise to a particularly virulent form of anti-Semitism and anti-Sinicism in the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. It is in that context that the negative comparison of the Chinese to the Jews became popular in the conservative rhetoric and nationalist propaganda in Southeast Asia.

The comparison of the Chinese to the Jews, however, does not just come from the negative side of anti-Semitic and anti-Chinese nationalists. For example, Professor Wang Gungwu, who has been most actively involved in the study of overseas Chinese, particularly in Southeast Asia, and has edited two volumes of essays entitled *The Chinese Diaspora*, not only mentioned King Vajiravudh's negative view of the Chinese as "the Jews of the Orient," but also quoted a remark made by Harry Benda, who studied Indonesia, to the effect that "the fate of the Chinese there could be similar to that of the Jews in Germany." Now Harry Benda is a Jewish scholar whose family were victims of the Holocaust in Czechoslovakia, so his comparison of the Chinese and the Jews certainly does not contain any negative element of anti-Semitic stereotypes. According to Wang Gungwu, Benda "refrained from using the term diaspora in his writings" (*Joining* 41), and Wang himself certainly felt reluctant to use the term "Chinese diaspora" (*Joining* 41). Wang had his reservations about this term because he wanted to emphasize the diversity of overseas Chinese communities, while the Chinese government from the late Qing dynasty to Mao's time and after had always used the concept of *huaqiao* or Chinese sojourners to "bring about ethnic if not nationalist or racist binding of all Chinese at home and abroad." That creates a big problem for Chinese minorities overseas. "In the countries which have large Chinese minorities," says Wang, "that term had become a major source of the suspicion that the Chinese minorities could never feel loyalty towards their host nations" (*Joining* 39). Wang worried that the term "Chinese diaspora," like the old term *huaqiao* or Chinese sojourners, might become a falsely unifying term that would obscure the reality of diverse overseas Chinese communities and create tension and problems for those communities in Southeast Asia. Eventually, however, Wang Gungwu accepts the term and maintains that insofar as we fully understand the diversity of Chinese communities in different parts of the world, we may use the term "Chinese diaspora" with necessary caution. "Of course," he says, "it is misleading and politically sensitive for the Chinese to be compared to the Jews in the Muslim world of Southeast Asia, but if the reality makes the comparison appropriate, so be it" (*Joining* 38). In my view, that comparison is indeed appropriate, for Chinese and Jewish diasporas have characteristics that are so close to one another and live in social and political environments so similar that a Chinese-Jewish comparison is indeed justifiable.

Anthony Reid's idea of "entrepreneurial minorities" might be a good place to start. Reid maintains that the Jews in Central Europe before the war and the Chinese in

Southeast Asia are "the two most important entrepreneurial minorities" (33), and by that he means "economically powerful but politically disadvantaged minorities" (39). He argues that the Jews and the Chinese are comparable "in their creative and vulnerable role as 'outsiders at the center' in dynamic processes of change" (34). On the creative side, both Jews and the Chinese are doing remarkably well as entrepreneurial minorities, particularly in finance and trade. In Vienna before the war, as Steven Beller points out, Jews had an enormous impact on many aspects of the Viennese society, "on its high and even its popular culture, and on the city's economy. The idea of Jewish predominance in many key areas of Viennese life was not merely the paranoid invention of febrile anti-Semitic imagination but was based on a social reality confirmed by a few facts and figures" (111). As for the Chinese in Southeast Asia, Eliezer Ayal draws on a May 1997 *Chicago Tribune* report under the title "Chinese Expatriates Dominating Asian Economies," and claims that ethnic Chinese count less than 2 percent of the population in the Philippines, but they own 55 percent of the wealth in the private sector; in Indonesia, the Chinese consist only 3 percent of the nation's population, but they own 70 to 80 percent of the wealth in the private sector. There are similar figures for Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia, though the percentage of ethnic Chinese in the populations of Thailand and Malaysia is relatively higher. Even allowing some inflation and the unreliable nature of such statistic figures, Ayal concludes, "there is very little doubt that the overseas Chinese are the major players in the economies of SEAC. They have also developed very extensive networks both within the SEAC and across borders. These networks are a major factor in their commercial success and, more recently, in their phenomenally large investments in the newly opening economy of Mainland China" (156-157). The idea that overseas Chinese dominate Southeast Asian economies, however, is somewhat exaggerated, and in particular the claim that "the 3% owning 70%" of Indonesia's wealth is the first myth Wang Gungwu tries very hard to dissipate (*China and Southeast Asia* 6-10). It is beyond doubt, however, that the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia are spectacularly successful in business and trade and that they do play a major part in the economic life of those countries. It is also undeniable that the success and affluence of many of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asian countries have created tension and conflict between the Chinese minorities and the local majorities.

Indeed, it is the predicament of economic success and political disadvantage that makes the Chinese and the Jews remarkably comparable. As Beller puts it, "it is here that the parallel with the experience of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia becomes all too close and all too relevant" (115). So is the parallel situation of the potential danger of tension and conflict. As Beller says, "the resulting response from the 'native' populaces and political leaderships is, for a historian of Central European Jewry, eerily familiar" (115). It is the negative response from the "native" majority and political leaders in Southeast Asian countries that makes the Chinese minorities vulnerable as "outsiders at the center." In Malaysia, for example, the response takes the form of rather aggressive state intervention, for many policies and government

regulations are ostensibly designed to give Malays an upper hand at the expense of the Chinese and the Indians. "Access to educational opportunities, especially at the tertiary level, is rationed to favor Malays," as K.S. Jomo reports:

> There has been a similar bias in recruitment and promotions in government service, in public enterprises, and, increasingly, in the private sector as well, especially where government influence exists. The "middle-class" privilege has probably generated the most interethnic animosity, but the area of business privilege is almost equally contentious. Since the 1970s, most business regulation in Malaysia—whether pertaining to the allocation of licenses, permits, shares, and other business opportunities or to the award of tenders and contracts—has favored Malays. (243)

Malaysia may have the most blatantly hostile state policies towards the Chinese, but similar conditions exist in Indonesia and the other Southeast Asian countries as well, and it is in reaction to such unfavorable conditions that Chinese business in the region has established what Jomo calls a special idiom: "a Chinese business idiom, or a culture, based on a kind of resistance to state control and the sense that ethnic discrimination is either an existing or at least a potential threat" (253). In this connection, we may recall the restrictions historically imposed on Jewish communities in Europe and the resultant disproportionate over-representation of Jews in finance and commerce. As Beller observes, in premodern and early modern Europe, Jews "had served only particular functions in the economy, as moneylenders and merchants in particular trades, because Christians should not perform such immoral services and Jews, as deniers of Christ, should not be allowed to perform any others. The connection between Jews and money was thus a result of prejudice that had, however, resulted in a socioeconomic reality whereby finance, especially the finances of many Central European states, was often 'in Jewish hands,' to use a loaded phrase" (102).

Again, the situation of Chinese entrepreneurial minorities in Southeast Asia is remarkably similar. Walter Zenner's discussion of the "middleman minority," and in particular minority moneylenders in traditional societies, may help us understand the phenomenon of occupational specialization by ethnicity. Despite his own warning against a simple comparison of overseas Chinese with diaspora Jews in terms of similarities alone, Zenner does see the connection between the Jews and the Chinese as moneylenders. "Moneylending was, for a long time, the major economic role played by Jews and Lombards in the economies of Western and Central Europe, as well as by Armenians, Chinese, and certain Indian castes in other parts of the world," says Zenner. "Certainly, the stereotype of the avaricious, almost cannibalistic moneylender, exemplified by Shakespeare's Shylock is a central part of the image of the Jew in European cultures" (27-28). Because of the risk involved in moneylending and the necessary distance or business-like impersonality in the relationship between debtor and creditor, the moneylender in traditional societies was very often a stranger, someone from a separate minority group whose ethnicity, language,

customs, or religious beliefs might mark them out as the different, the foreign, the expendable outsider. "Thus, Jews and excommunicated Christians provided loans in medieval Christendom, while Chinese were the lenders among the Muslims of Indonesia, Malaysia, and elsewhere" (Zenner 32-33). But if the middleman minority or the entrepreneurial minority is the product of a combination of social, historical as well as economic factors, we may wonder what is it in the Jewish and Chinese diasporas that makes these minority groups so successful in business and commerce, even in spite of negative majority response and repressive state policies? If we take Shakespeare's Shylock as a highly symbolic example, then Shylock does not, at least in my understanding, simply epitomize avarice and hatred, but he also stands for the persecuted and victimized minority whose plea for a common humanity goes completely unattended. Here we are moving from strictly economic considerations to consideration of social and cultural dimensions.

Perhaps the central issue here, as Reid puts it, "is whether the prominence of entrepreneurial minorities results from economic causes likely to occur in any society at some stage in its transition to capitalism, or whether it is rooted in particularly intractable cultural and political configurations" (37). In the end, he finds that "neither economics nor culture can explain everything" (Reid 37). In my view, economic and cultural aspects are not immune to one another, but economic behavior as a special kind of human behavior is often determined or over-determined by culture and tradition. Indeed, if we consider the important role of culture and tradition, it would not seem so surprising that Jewish and Chinese diaspora communities have behaved very much alike and have very much the same kind of success in finance and commerce, though in many other aspects these two groups have very little in common.[3]

In a way, to find a cultural explanation for economic behavior is also what Max Weber tried to do in his famous argument that sought to establish a causal link between a Protestant ethic and the advent of modern capitalism. The Weber thesis is justly famous for providing economic activities with an extremely rich and complex social context, relating the rational behavior in business and manufacturing to psychological determinants and religious beliefs. Of course, Weber made a sharp distinction between what he called the Jewish "pariah capitalism" and the "rational capitalism" developed from Puritan values based on a Protestant ethic, which eventually became the predominant form of social structure in modern times. "The Jews," says Weber, "stood on the side of the politically and speculatively oriented adventurous capitalism; their ethos was, in a word, that of pariah-capitalism. But Puritanism carried the ethos of the rational organization of capital and labour. It took over from the Jewish ethic only what was adapted to this purpose" (*Protestant Ethic* 165-166). Similarly, Weber made a sharp contrast between Confucianism and Puritanism in his effort to explain the unique influence of Protestant ethics on modern capitalism and, at the same time, the non-existence of modern capitalism in China. "The Chinese lacked the central, religiously determined, and rational method of life which came from within and which was characteristic of the classical Puritan," Weber

argues. "The Chinese did not deliberately cut himself off from the impressions and influences of the 'world'—a world which the Puritan sought to control, just as he did himself, by means of a definite and one-sided rational effort of will." (*Religion of China* 243-244). Thus by differentiating modern capitalism from both the Jewish and the Confucian traditions, Weber made modern capitalism uniquely related to Puritanism or an ascetic Protestantism.

The limited space I have in this short essay does not allow any detailed discussion of the Weber thesis and its validity, but at least a major question can be raised here. In the light of the extraordinary business success of Jewish and Chinese entrepreneurial minorities in Central Europe and Southeast Asia, it becomes rather difficult to sustain the very core of Weber's argument, namely that modern capitalism was necessarily predicated on a cluster of religious values and facilitated by a Protestant ethic. One may wonder, is it possible, and indeed more likely, that economic success is related to secular or non-religious ideas and attitudes rather than religious ones? As indeed W. D. Rubinstein asks: "whether it was the explicit teachings and doctrines of religious bodies which engendered any ability by its adherents to perform successfully as capitalists, or, on the contrary, whether it was a variety of distinctive group characteristics and salient features *unrelated* to religion or religious doctrine which might have engendered entrepreneurial success" (138-139). Rubinstein's own conclusion is that "high marginality combined with high self-esteem may be key characteristics of most groups, which are over-productive, sometimes phenomenally over-productive, in any intellectual or cultural field" (145). I would add to these the importance of literacy and education. Even if some of the first generation immigrant entrepreneurs may not be highly educated, the deep respect for learning and the sense of cultural pride are nonetheless present in all successful minority groups. For Jews and the Chinese, that is an obvious point of convergence.

In Vienna before the war, for instance, there was, according to Beller, "a remarkable overrepresentation of Jews in the educational sector. Jews, under 10 percent of the city's population, provided around 30 percent of the city's secondary schoolboys and an even higher percentage among girls receiving secondary education" (112). That description may very well suit Chinese minorities in the United States and Canada and many other places. Speaking of Central European Jewry, Victor Karady notes "a kind of 'overinvestment' in education" (127). In addition to other factors, he observes, "Jewish educational propensities were equally important in making Jews successful. They originated to a large extent in religious practices grounded, at least for men, upon learning and active literacy" (127). But the actual content of religious practice is not important here, because "religious educational habits gave rise even more directly to secular learning propensities applicable to highly specialized knowledge used in the independent professions or in freelance, paraintellectual occupations such as journalism, editing, creative writing, and other cultural endeavors" (Karady 130). In other words, it is not religion as such, but non-religious features in the Jewish culture that have played an important role in determining their behavior, economic

and otherwise, and contributed to their success in business and commerce.

For the Chinese, social mobility was traditionally dependent almost exclusively on the study of Confucian classics and a rigorous examination system. In modern times, when the classical Confucian education gives way to a modern curriculum in schools and universities, traditional attitudes and educational propensities easily translate into an emphasis on learning new and modern subjects, while a deep respect for learning and knowledge persists as a cultural habit and important value in all Chinese communities. In many Southeast Asian countries, the learning and use of Chinese were forbidden or restricted, but the situation has changed since the late 1980s when internal and external Chinese investments play an increasingly bigger role in economic and cultural realms. "Governments eager to attract foreign investment not only liberalized investment rules, bringing an influx of foreign Chinese investors, but also relaxed domestic restrictions on expressions of Chinese culture," as Linda Lim and Peter Gosling have noticed. "In Indonesia, a twenty-five-year-old ban on the importation and use of written Chinese characters has been lifted, and Chinese language schools are now allowed to operate. In Malaysia, Chinese cultural activities such as lion dance performances, once a red flag signaling ethnic chauvinism and a refusal to assimilate, have blossomed, and Chinese schools and community groups have become the beneficiaries of donations from Taiwan investors" (290-291). At the present, it seems that relationship among different ethnic groups in Southeast Asia remains relatively stable, and that has a direct relation with the important role Hong Kong and Taiwan continue to play in the regional and international economies and the recent positive changes in Mainland China, as well as the economic situation in the region as a whole.

How to maintain balance among different ethnic groups and prevent serious racial and ethnic conflicts in the future are important issues for the region, and indeed for the world at large. These are of course complicated issues and difficult to have solutions that can eliminate all potential conflicts once and for all. And yet, in search of solutions, we need to come back to economics and culture again, for the sustained economic development and improvement of the quality of life for all is the most effective means to attack the problem at its very root. Equally important, however, are the cultivation of a culture of tolerance and coexistence, the sharing of our common humanity, and aspiration for high standard of moral responsibilities not only for oneself and one's own group, but for one's neighbors, for others and other groups. In the face of so much tension and actual or potential conflict between different ethnic groups or nations, I am aware of the difficulty and even the quixotic nature of such high hopes, but without trying to find ways to ease the tension and work out compromises, if not perfect harmonies, we shall have to face even greater danger and disaster, the endless cycles of violence and racial hatred, and the total breakdown of human civilization. Optimism and pessimism are two different ways of responding to the world, including the world's suffering and miseries, but the difference is that optimism may lead to positive effort and action, while pessimism leads nowhere and

to nothing. With that as background, let us at least try to look for possible and realistic solutions.

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Endnotes

1. Asvabahu (King Vajiravudh), *Phuak yew*, etc. (*The Jews of the Orient*, etc.) Bangkok: King Vajiravudh Memorial Foundation, 1985. 72 ff.

2. See Edmund Scot, in S. Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrims, Containing a History of the Work in Sea Voyages and Land Travels by English and Others*, vol. 2 (Glasgow: MacLehase, 1905), 439-43.

3. I have argued elsewhere the remarkable similarities between the Jewish and the Chinese cultural traditions and the way they were perceived by others, particularly Christian interpreters. See Zhang Longxi, "Cultural Differences and Cultural Constructs."